

1969

# The influence of the early English Baptists on the development of the concept of religious liberty

Rebecca Saunders

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Saunders, Rebecca, "The influence of the early English Baptists on the development of the concept of religious liberty" (1969). *Honors Theses*. 1057.

<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/honors-theses/1057>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND LIBRARIES



3 3082 01040 2138

Rel.  
saunders

The Influence of the  
Early English Baptists on the  
Development of the Concept of  
Religious Liberty

Rebecca Saunders  
January 10, 1969

## CHAPTER I

### THE LEVELLER IMAGE AND DOCTRINE

Though the civil war in England in the middle 17th century is largely reviewed as a conflict of religious ideologies, giving it the name Puritan Revolution, the nation was likewise divided by competitive political principles and parties. While England could look back upon a stable, confirmed heritage of monarchy, this period of political battles and near anarchy saw the rise of a mild republicanism and even a radical, democratic ideal. With determined insistence, dedication, and even violence, a handful of men introduced concepts of democracy, liberty, natural rights, and justice for the common man. Such revolutionary principles were generally misunderstood or rejected. Yet by the turn of events and by the fanatical insistence and organization of the new party, the Levellers, their ideas of government drew wide attention, wielded influence, and even gained acceptance among the political and army leaders.

To interpret the possible impact of the Leveller movement and to understand the nature of this party of revolt, one must first know the character of its leaders, as well as the content and derivation of their ideals. Hence without the near martyrdom and popular image of John Lilburne, the exactness and influence in debating of John Wildman, the agitating leadership of Edward Sexby, the democratic zeal of Richard Overton, and the organization and clarifications of William Walwyn, the Leveller movement would never have attained its form and influence.

Although the accession of James I to the throne in 1603 heralded the beginning of one of the most repressive periods of the monarchy both politically and religiously, there were significant undercurrents of what was to be the greatest quest for religious liberty in England. This struggle originated in the enlightenment of the Renaissance and the revolution in religion of the Reformation. Furthermore, it was nurtured in the fight for religious toleration by an ever increasing number of dissenting groups. Not until the appearance of the English Baptist in the early seventeenth century was the struggle carried to its logical theoretical conclusion, manifesting itself in formal protest. The clarion call for absolute religious liberty was uniquely voiced by this community of faith through the writings of their leaders and common confessions of faith. The idea that the spiritual nature of man lay beyond the realm of temporal control was eventually to gain general acceptance and to be enacted as law, but only through the perserverance of men willing to risk their lives in an effort to secure for all men what they believed to be their God given right.

The Renaissance and Reformation alike altered thought patterns and the institutions of society. During the Renaissance new opportunities for the broadening of the mind became available through the increase of travel and the invention of

the printing press. Accompanying the increase of knowledge was the growth of sceptism and indifference. Humanism served as a liberalizing force aiding in the relaxation of the theory of persecution. These forces plus the secularization of government combined to cause a breakdown in the authority of the church.<sup>1</sup> The concept of religious toleration was actually widely accepted among the important thinkers of the period such as Sir Thomas More.<sup>2</sup> If the attitudes of the Renaissance prepared the way for the development of the theory of toleration by their encouragement of individual and unsystematic thought, the Reformation contributed the logical basis.<sup>3</sup> The authority of the church was now replaced by the authority of the Bible and the private judgment of the Christian. Within the revolt itself and its foremost tenets of individualism and spiritual freedom, the principle of toleration was implicit.<sup>4</sup> The demand could not be long ignored by authorities of church or state.

The formation of a multiplicity of religious sects was a natural outgrowth of the Protestant Reformation, but the development was frustrated in England by the tolerant ecclesiastical policies of Elizabeth I.<sup>5</sup> The Elizabethan Settlement established the English monarch as supreme governor of the church through the Act of Supremacy and provided for the exercising of this authority through the Act of Uniformity, which required each citizen to sign an oath acknowledging the ruler's right to control over all civil and religious officials. Within this system there was a certain flexibility which allowed for freedom of conscience as

long as outward conformity was maintained. Progress toward toleration through greater diversity and influence of religious sects was further delayed by the first two Stuarts with their strong opposition to particular sectarian groups.<sup>6</sup>

When James I assumed the reins of government in 1603, there had been a great upsurge of optimism among many non-conformist groups. This was because of James's professed belief in the futility of attempting to impose religious faith with temporal weapons. There was, however, a basic discrepancy between his theoretical understanding and his application in his ecclesiastical policies. As king he felt it was his duty to uphold the established religion, punishing those who refused to conform, although he claimed to exercise no authority over conscience.<sup>7</sup> In spite of the fact that James viewed himself as endowed with power both temporal and spiritual directly from God as expressed in the divine right theory, he allowed for opposition by the heads of the church if they felt his decrees were not in accordance with God's will.<sup>8</sup> In short James acted on the premise that if persuasion and reason did not produce conformity, then bodily force must be employed.<sup>9</sup> It was this attitude which pervaded English philosophy and government policy during the early years of the seventeenth century.

Among the dissenters there were varying views towards toleration and religious liberty. The Puritans desired freedom to exercise what they felt was God's will but sought this through the establishment of a church to their liking with the support

of the ruler, whom they believed to have certain spiritual powers from God.<sup>10</sup> The Congregationalists stressed the importance of complete separation of church and state, a personal experience, and the church as a community of believers, but were not opposed to a state church provided there was freedom in the exercise of internal affairs.<sup>11</sup> Only among Baptist congregations could the plea for true religious liberty be heard.

It was not until after 1603 that any group was identified by the name Baptist. Throughout the later half of the sixteenth century there were areas of definite Baptist sentiment, but there was no organization of formal churches as this was prohibited by the Elizabethan repression.<sup>12</sup> These feelings were generally held by Anabaptist groups from whom the Baptist borrowed much but from whom they maintained a distinctly separate identity. The most significant difference and one which enabled the English Baptists eventually to establish their church in England was their "recognition of the validity of civil government."<sup>13</sup>

Persecution in England forced many dissenters to flee to Holland in order to practice their faith. It was here within the Separatist congregations under the influence of the Dutch Mennonites that the English Baptists had their birth. John Smyth, who had come to Holland in 1607 or 1608 as a Puritan with his congregation from Gainborough, joined the Separatist congregation of Francis Johnson and Henry Ainsworth.<sup>14</sup> A disagreement with Johnson over the church organization and the use of Greek and Hebrew texts in sermons soon caused Smyth to lead a group to with-

draw from the congregation.<sup>15</sup> While in Amsterdam, Smyth had extensive contact with the Dutch Anabaptist Mennonites. Desiring to form the same type of pure Biblical church, he adopted many of their beliefs. The congregations did not at this time merge because the English could not agree with the Dutch on infant baptism and their refusal to take oaths or otherwise participate in civil affairs.<sup>16</sup> John Smyth baptized himself and his followers in 1608 and founded the first English Baptist church. A schism soon arose in the church over the question of apostolic succession of the ministry, resulting in the removal of Thomas Helwys, John Murton, and others from the fellowship. Smyth, unable to maintain a stable congregation because of his rapidly changing ideas, applied for admittance to the Mennonite church and became progressively less influential in the development of English Baptists.<sup>17</sup>

English Baptists in Holland continued to increase under the leadership of Thomas Helwys, who soon adopted the Arminian principle of general redemption. Helwys increasingly felt the urgency of returning to England to establish Baptist congregations there and make a plea for religious liberty.<sup>18</sup> Thus in 1611 a few returned to England to form the first General Baptist congregation on English soil at Pinners' Hall, London.<sup>19</sup> Helwys died shortly after the publication of his request for toleration, A Short Declaration of the Mistry of Iniquity, and John Murton assumed leadership of the congregation. He was able to hold the congregation together through the most vigorous period of persecu-



tion until relief came with the Spanish marriage negotiations in 1620. This enabled the church to engage in missionary effort, increasing its strength so that by 1626 it had secured a firm foothold.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the centuries there had been individuals who had voiced pleas for liberty of conscience, but the English Baptists were the first group to call for religious freedom within the context of a structured society. Unlike their Anabaptist ancestors they did not desire to do away with the institution of the state and attempted to correct the misconception that they too shared in these anarchist tendencies. Even the Dutch Mennonites placed more emphasis on disassociation from governmental affairs than the English Baptists could accept. They rejected the Mennonite belief in refusal to take oaths of allegiance and to bear arms.<sup>21</sup> In spite of the fact that these early Baptists differed from the Anabaptist and Mennonites, much of their doctrine was influenced by these two groups.

The Anabaptist over the entire continent were known and hated for their opposition to all established churches. In the face of severe persecution, they had courageously proclaimed their right to freedom of conscience. Although the movement never gained much force in England, the ideas were known. Anabaptist views were accepted by many in Holland which was the birthplace of English Baptists. The Dutch Mennonite Church, sometimes called the Anabaptist Mennonite Church, had more moderate ideas concerning the role of the government in religion than other Anabaptists.

In the Waterlander Confession of 1580 they expressed their belief that the civil magistrate was a good and natural institution ordained by God for the protection of good and punishment of evil for the benefit of society. Acknowledging their duty to honor the magistrate, except when his ruling was contrary to God's will and pay taxes, they pointed out that the civil government had no right to any authority over the spiritual kingdom. They did not object to moderate power but were prepared to withdraw if the state became corrupted. The swearing of oaths was still forbidden.<sup>22</sup>

There were reasons for the fact that Baptists were as John Locke said "the first and only propounders of absolute liberty, just and true liberty."<sup>23</sup> Within their doctrinal and institutional structures, there were certain concepts which led naturally to the adoption of the principle of religious liberty.<sup>24</sup> First of all they viewed the church as a community of believers, who had voluntarily entered into a covenant relationship, in order to give full expression to their faith and seek truth.<sup>25</sup> The formation of such a body was to be spontaneous with freedom of expression allowed, which necessitated the absence of outward restraint.<sup>26</sup> The belief in the right of private judgment led to the conclusion that no church could claim to possess absolute truth; therefore, all interpretations of God's word and will must be equal before the law. Since each person was accountable to God, error must be corrected by spiritual and not temporal power.<sup>27</sup> Finally the belief in universal salvation as opposed to predestination

caused them to conclude that to kill an individual outside of the faith was to rob God of the opportunity to redeem him.<sup>28</sup>

The development of the Baptist concept of complete religious liberty and its impact is best expressed in the writings and protest of four of their leaders and several anonymous works. The first of these men and the father of the movement was John Smyth. After election as a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge, he was ordained in the ministry of the Anglican church at Lincoln. From this time on Smyth moved in rapid succession from one church to another continually searching for truth.<sup>29</sup> In spite of all his changes in thought, he remained unblemished in character and commanded the respect of all those with whom he was associated.<sup>30</sup> This earnest search led him to advance the first plea for total freedom in religion from the control of the magistrate to be backed by the support of a congregation of believers.

While he held the position of preacher in Lincolnshire, his quest began with a nine month period of investigation of his uncertainty about various practices of the establishment. Upon discovery of the validity of his doubts, he gave up his position to join a separatist congregation at Gainsborough and soon after in 1606 became pastor.<sup>31</sup> He then denied his statement of 1601 recognizing the need for government machinery to control religion, which justified the establishment of magistrates to govern the church, the persecution of those adhering to false religion, and compelling of men to worship. In place of this Smyth supported the typical Puritan outlook, which he expressed in Principles

and Inferences Concerning the Visible Church. Although he agreed that much spiritual power should rest on the individual congregation, he did not deny the king's authority, in fact, responsibility for establishing visible churches and commanding his subjects to attend.<sup>32</sup> He went further to say, "Whosoever taketh upon him to erect new forms or shapes of visible churches and to appoint new officers, lawes, ministerie, worship or communion in the church is Antichrist."<sup>33</sup> For some time he held this belief that the Christian church could not be maintained unless a Godly chosen king protected it and punished false worshippers.<sup>34</sup>

John Smyth's ideas about the proper relationship between church and state began to change after his emigration to Holland. Here under the influence of the Mennonites, he became convinced that the only true church was one patterned after the New Testament. In "A Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles" written in Latin in 1609, he set forth his view that all men believing in Christ as the only means of redemption and that repentance and faith bring forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, though they may differ slightly in doctrine, should be accepted as Christian brothers.<sup>35</sup> This idea which he expanded in a later confession was the basis of understanding which caused him to become the apostle of religious liberty.<sup>36</sup>

Moving beyond the concept of the most advanced Separatist thinkers, who asked for freedom from state control of the church but expected the state to promote true religion, Smyth was the first to make a plea for freedom of conscience and total separation

of church and state. The plea was incorporated in the one hundred articles of "Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion" written in 1611. In article sixty-four he summarized the composition of the church as follows, "That the outward church visible, consist of penitent persons only, and of such as believing in Christ, bring fruits worthy amendment of life."<sup>37</sup> The faithful were instructed in article eighty-two to be subject to governmental authority not out of fear but for conscience sake. He went further admonishing them to pay tribute and customs, give honor, and offer prayers for their rulers. This was in accordance with God's will and the teachings of the New Testament.<sup>38</sup>

Articles eighty-three, four, and five dealt with the rightful position of the magistrate. Smyth affirmed the office of magistrate to be good and to have been ordained by God for the protection and welfare of man to insure that justice and civility may be maintained. Furthermore, the magistrate could serve God in his calling by being righteous and just and thereby bring outward blessing to himself and his subjects. It was in article eighty-four that Smyth defined the limitations of the authority of the magistrate in religion.

That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free to every man's conscience, and to handle only civil transgressions, injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king and law-giver of the church and conscience.<sup>39</sup>

The ruler was instructed in article eighty-five to love his enemies rather than kill them, pray for them instead of punishing them, feed them rather than imprisoning or banishing them. Suffering was required of him as of every true Christian.<sup>40</sup>

This demand for the separation of temporal and spiritual power was the result of the well reasoned thought processes of John Smyth. By emphasizing the spiritual nature of religion and the community of believers as the true church, he pointed up the idea that the state could fill this role as foolish. The props were knocked out from under persecution by the declaration that the true church was composed of those who had experienced the saving power of God in their lives, which could never be created by a secular body. Persecution appeared to him to be stupid and useless. The only effective means of punishment were spiritual, and even then excommunication was to be used only as a last resort. All that Smyth and the many Baptists who followed him professed to believe demanded absolute spiritual freedom.<sup>41</sup>

John Smyth laid the doctrinal foundations for the English Baptist church, but it was Thomas Helwys who led in the establishment of the church in England. Coming from a moderately well-to-do and influential family of Nottinghamshire which was able to provide him with a good education, he was associated with Smyth and other Separatists near the close of the sixteenth century. He financially supported the Separatist emigration to Holland and upon arriving joined with Smyth's congregation. When the split in the church occurred, Helwys became the pastor for

the group who opposed uniting with the Mennonites. In 1611 "A Declaration of Faith of the English People remaining at Amsterdam in Holland" was written by Helwys to clarify the beliefs of his congregation.<sup>42</sup> This has been considered by W. J. McGlothlin as the earliest Baptist Confession.

This confession after outlining the basic doctrines on which the church was founded, clearly defined the relation of the church to the state giving scriptural support. Since the revelation of God was not given uniquely to any particular church, no church should enjoy any more privileges than any other. This statement denied the validity of the establishment of a state church. Likewise the punishment of an impenitent brother lay beyond the control of the temporal power. His punishment was to be administered through the spiritual means of excommunication. This was in no way to jeopardize his standing in civil society. Helwys went on to discuss the office of magistrate, recognizing that it had been established by "a Holie Ordained off God"<sup>43</sup> The sword had been given to them in order that they might serve their subjects by protection of their general welfare and punishment of evil doers. Therefore, the subjects were required to obey for conscience sake rather than out of fear. It was considered a sin to speak evil of those in honored position or the government. The Christian was instead to pay his taxes, perform all required duties, and offer prayers for those in authority. Likewise, the faithful were to be obedient to the law except when it denied the will of God. Helwys

carried the concept of the goodness of government much further than Smyth professing that magistrate "maybe member off the church off [sic] Christ, retaining their magistracie, for no Holie Ordinance off [sic.] God defarreth anie from being a member off Christ's Church."<sup>44</sup>

This was followed by a final break from the idea the Mennonite Baptists held in regard to oath taking. The Confession declared "That it is lawful in a just cause for the deciding of strife to take an oath by the name off the Lord."<sup>45</sup>

With this confession came the final doctrinal preparation of the Baptist's struggle for freedom of conscience in England. The Baptists acknowledged the goodness of civil authority and were not only prepared to submit to it but to support it; therefore, for the first time they were in a position to make a valid protest. It was at this point that Thomas Helwys became convinced that he and his congregation must return to their native land to take their stand for religious liberty. With missionary zeal they made the trip in 1611 and established the first Baptist church on English soil at Pinner's Hall in London. From this position they began to wage a vigorous propaganda campaign directed at James I and his government. The work he produced was A Short Declaration of the Mistry of Iniquity published in 1612. Probably written in Holland before his removal from that country, the work was a justification for the establishment of the first Baptist church and a demand for the universal free exercise of religion.<sup>46</sup> Its appearance marked the first claim to freedom of worship to be published in England. The inscription in the autographed copy



of this Declaration, which was directed toward James I, read:

"The king is a mortall man and not God, therefore hath no power over y immortall soules of his subjects to make lawes and ordinances for them and to set spirituall Lords over them"<sup>47</sup>

A Short Declaration of the Mistry of Iniquity was divided into four parts. The first sections opened with a description of the lamentable state of the world, more particularly of England. The condemnation of the first beast who performed the mistry of iniquity by the use of temporal power in religion was stated. In speaking of the Roman Catholic Church, he lashed out against the Romish system which forced men's consciences by the use of the sword and against the common book of prayer which bound men in their worship. Excommunication he declared should be the highest form of punishment. He criticized the tax system of that church which exacted fees even from the excommunicated in order that the bishops might enjoy worldly comfort. The second beast he suggested was the Anglican Church, which though she had broken from Rome had adopted many of her methods. To say that simple men could not understand God's word without an interpreter was blasphemous. The church officials claimed power over men's spirits just as kings claimed power over their bodies, but only God was entitled to this power. For these and many other abuses, the Anglicans would call down the wrath of God upon themselves.<sup>48</sup>

The second and most important section was dedicated to King James. Helwys began by affirming that the king was set in office by God's will and all temporal powers were rightly

delegated to him, but the heavenly kingdom was reserved for God himself. Whenever the king attempted to usurp these spiritual powers, he became a beast of the mystery of iniquity. God would not ask the king to enforce any religion, for God would wish only for spiritual not physical obedience. Helwys's ideas were well summarized in the following words:

Our Lord the King is but an earthly king, and he hath no aucthority as a king but in earthly causes, and if the kings people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane lawes made by the King, our Lord the King can require no more: for mens religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answere for it, neither may the King be judg betweene God and man. Let them be heretikes, Turks, Jewes or whatsoever, it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.<sup>49</sup>

An inquiry was made of the King concerning whether he planned to continue appointing high church officials in opposition to the word of God. He commented that it was no more in accordance with God's will for James's church officials to coerce the people into Anglicanism than it was for Mary to force Catholicism on them. In closing a plea was made to the King to free his people from the bondage of the spiritual Lords.<sup>50</sup>

In the last two sections, Helwys dealt with the failures of the other separatists groups in the fight for religious liberty. The Puritans had not been true to what they professed, calling for liberty in order that they might practice their faith and refusing it to others. They professed that Christ's kingship as vital but did not allow him full power of government over his church. The Brownists had been wrong in requiring the baptism derived from a false church. In the appendices he struck a blow

at the Separatists who did not return from Holland to help in the struggle for freedom.<sup>51</sup> The message of The Mistry of Iniquity was captured in the following paragraph from the work:

Let the King judge, is it not equal that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves, which it shall be no excuse for them to say, we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion by the King or by them that had authority for him. . . Christ will have no man's life touched for his cause. . . If any refuse to receive his disciples, he only bids them shake off the dust of their feet for a witness against them. . . Then let not our Lord the King suffer his sword. . . to be used to rule and keep in obedience the people of God and the King to the laws, statutes and ordinances of Christ. . . the sword of whose kingdom is spiritual. . . (we) profess and teach that in all earthly things the king's power is to be submitted unto; and in heavenly or spiritual things, if the King or any in authority under him shall exercise their power against any they are not to resist by any way or means, although it were in their power but rather to submit their lives as Christ and his disciples did, and yet keep their consciences to God.<sup>52</sup>

The activities of Thomas Helwys after the publication of The Mistry of Iniquity were not well recorded. Probably he was imprisoned at Newgate shortly after the appearance of the manuscript and died around 1622.<sup>53</sup> In 1614 an early English Anabaptist Petition appeared which has been credited to Helwys by Champlin Burrage. The petition addressed "To the right Honorable Assemblie of the Commonhouse of Parliament" voiced a complaint that prisoners who were willing to swear allegiance to the King and who had been loyal in all things were imprisoned for reasons of conscience. In addition, the author complained about the fact that Catholics who had sworn the oath were not imprisoned but often those in his group were subject to the harsh

judgments of the bishops. He called on Parliament to proclaim religious freedom, but the plea was ignored.<sup>54</sup> The firm theoretical basis of the active struggle for liberty which Helwys had laid with his respect for civil authority but strong conviction of the necessity of complete dissociation of the magistrate from religious affairs was enlarged and expounded on by members of his congregation after his death.<sup>55</sup>

In 1615 as a result of severe persecution, the congregation of Thomas Helwys published a pamphlet entitled, "Persecution for Religion Judg'd and Condemn'd: in a Discourse between an Anti-christian and a Christian. Proving By the Law of God and of the Land, and by King James his many Testimonies, That no man ought to be Persecuted for his Religion, so he Testifie his Allegiance by the oath appointed by law." Some sources have even credited the work to Helwys himself. Whether or not he wrote it, his writing agreed with the theory incorporated in it. Out of a well instructed community in the principles of religious liberty "Persecution for Religion Judg'd and Condemn'd" came as an enlargement and clarification of that principle. The pamphlet had two divisions: the Epistle and the Dialogue, both of which appeared to have been written by the same individual.<sup>56</sup>

The Epistle opened with the author's statement that he felt it his duty to present to the king this proof that persecution was wrong according to the Bible and the King's own statements. While affirming that man ought not to be punished for his religious beliefs whether they be right or wrong, he denied the King's right

to force his subjects in any matter of conscience warning that he and his magistrates were subject to the judgment of Christ. Commending the King for not seeking the bloody persecution that Henry VIII had, he pleaded that he would desist from using his power to force conscience at all. The author reminded James of his speech at Whitehall in 1609 in which he said, "God must alter men's minds". When and if they could prove that God sanctioned their policies, the writer and his brethren would gladly submit. After giving an outline of his plan for the Dialogue, he begged the King to attempt to stop the church officials on their course of persecution of the faithful subjects of the King who were praying for their persecutors but could not agree with them. He concluded by explaining that he used the dialogue method because he could set down his objections plainly for the understanding of all.<sup>57</sup>

The main argument of the Dialogue was that the relationship between the King of England and his people was not like the King of Israel's. Christ established a new kingdom which was spiritual in which he was the only lawgiver; therefore, the English king could not by the nature of this kingdom be a special deputy of Christ. The Christian and the Antichristian argued this point back and forth. On the one hand the Christian asked Antichristian why he had made him hypocritical by forcing him to participate in worship which to him was false, while saying that he did this for his salvation. In response the Antichristian asked if men should be able to worship as they please. The Christian answered

that men were required to worship as God directed them; anything less was false worship. The Antichristian protested that if religious freedom were allowed it would produce a sort of division which would in turn invite sedition. Pointing to the scriptures and the prosperity and unity of the countries in which this freedom was enjoyed, the Christian deflated this argument. Christ himself did not use physical power to convince people and did not delegate this power to earthly kings.<sup>58</sup> As the Christian said:

The power and authority of the King is earthly, and God hath commanded me to submit to all ordinances of man. . . . Let him require what he will, I must of conscience obey him, with my body, goods, and all that I have. But my soul, where with I am to worship God, that belongeth to another King, whose kingdom is not of this world, whose people must come willingly, whose weapons are not carnal, but spiritual.<sup>59</sup>

The Christian then proceeded to prove that the statute law of the land only required civil obedience. In the oath of allegiance, required of all those who did not attend the established church, the signer confessed loyalty to the King and belief that the pope had no right to interfere in English affairs. Allegiance had to be evidenced by church attendance the Antichristian claimed, to which the Christian responded that he would come for this reason but not to worship against his conscience. Finally he pointed out that the King himself had stated that he only desired civil obedience from his subjects. The Dialogue closed with a discussion of true covenant church.<sup>60</sup>

A year before the appearance of "Persecution for Religion Judg'd and Condemn'd" in 1615, the earliest extant treatise making a claim for religious liberty was published. "Religion's Peace:

or A Plea for Liberty of Conscience" was penned by Leonard Busher, a rather obscure citizen of London, for the purpose of expounding the reasons against persecution for religion and proposing a plan for peaceful reconciliation.<sup>61</sup> This scholar, well versed in the Greek of the New Testament, suffered exile to Holland and starvation under the persecution in London. This was responsible in some measure for the roughness and lack of clarity in his writing style. The grandeur of his plea for liberty of thought and freedom of speech on religious matters interpreted in the broadest sense, however, was not obscured.<sup>62</sup>

Having addressed himself to King James and the High Court of Parliament, he first established that no king or people could simply by birth achieve the one true religion. On this basis he refuted the King's idea that it was his duty to promote religion by physical means. Under the prevailing legal system established by the Roman Catholics, the English people were forced to accept the religion into which the ruler was born. Busher maintained that even if this faith were the true one the only valid means of bringing people to the worship was through instruction. He called for the repeal of these laws and the end of the King's evil practice of compelling people to worship against their consciences. Not only was persecution useless because it failed to bring about change in men's hearts, it was evil because the killing of a non-believer assured that his soul would be one gained by the Devil. Recognizing that the King had erred through ignorance in following the practice of his predecessors, he begged him to allow the wheat

and the tares to grow together until the judgment day of God.<sup>63</sup>

Busher listed for the King's education a number of arguments against persecution. The basic reason proving it to be incorrect was that nowhere could be found from Christ a command to any king, bishop, or minister to persecute for differences of conscience in religion, instead Christ had instructed that men must be persuaded to faith through his word and spirit. Furthermore, persecution often brought death to the true witnesses of Christ. Christ's purpose in coming into the world was redemption not destruction; therefore, force should not even be used against non-Christians for this would alienate them from Christianity and remove the possibility of their salvation. Persecution by its very nature hindered the liberty of the gospel and caused people to ruin their faith by forcing their consciences against their will. If the use of force in spiritual matters was right for those in authority, it was in turn right for the Roman Catholics and even the infidels. Finally intolerance was a danger to the state bringing the loss of loyal subjects and encouraging lawlessness. After enumerating these arguments, Busher cleverly asked the King what would happen if he himself were converted to the apostolic faith. Following this he made his plea for the repeal of the harsh laws and assured the King that as ruler he was still under God's care.<sup>64</sup>

Next the author proposed certain rules for the King to follow to insure that liberty of conscience would not endanger his state. Subjects marked with treason were not to be allowed to hold office and required to wear some distinguishing type of clothing. In



addition, these were not to live in London and must have a license to come within ten miles of the court. Carrying of weapons by treasonous people was forbidden. Freedom of assembly to these people could not be permitted, but all groups should have free access to print what they wished based on scripture. Bushor concluded his argument by declaring that truth had nothing to fear; therefore, the true church need not persecute. "The state may defend religion's peace by their sword and civil power, but not the faith, otherwise than by the word and spirit of God!"<sup>65</sup>

After the death of Thomas Helwys, John Murton, who had also been a member of Smyth's congregation, became the leader of the English Baptists. During the period from 1614 to 1620 these brethren suffered severe persecution for their differences in conscience. From the Newgate prison came works advancing the truth of liberty of conscience. The most outstanding of these was "A Most Humble Supplication" believed to have been written by John Murton. It was printed in 1620 under this title, "A Most Humble Supplication of many of the King's Majesty's Loyal Subjects ready to Testify All Civil Obedience, by the Oath of Allegiance or otherwise and That of Conscience; who are Persecuted (Only For Differing In Religion), contrary To Divine And Human Testimonies as followeth."<sup>66</sup>

A long series of complimentary introductions led into the recounting of the suffering of Baptists. Then came the request to the King and Parliament that they repeal the repressive laws. The Baptist were not seeking to escape from any part of the civil law; they only wished the alleviation of persecution for differences

in conscience. This concluded the introduction and led into a discussion of the belief that the scriptures were the only basis for authority in the church. As Murton wrote, "The rule of faith is the doctrine of the Holy Ghost contained in the sacred scriptures, and not any church, council, prince, or potentate, nor any mortal man whatsoever."<sup>67</sup> Written under the inspiration of God for the instruction of Christians they were not to be thrown aside lightly. Although the church of England claimed to hold to the tenet that the scriptures caused men to realize their need of salvation and then perfected them in the faith, they did not practice it. Murton concluded that since the church could not provide a constant judge, men ought to abide solely by the scriptures, which they could interpret through the spirit of God. This ability to understand and interpret the scriptures was given to every person who feared and obeyed God even to the very simple. In fact, it was the learned in human learning who most commonly erred, for often God would hide his secrets from them. The author then challenged the King asking if he was not more evil than the pope because he allowed his people to study the word of God freely and then refused them the right to act according to their consciences.<sup>68</sup>

The preceeding discussion of the authority of the church culminated in a condemnation of persecution and a supplication for liberty of conscience. In the words of Murton, "And we see most manifestly, that whatsoever is not of faith is sin, an without faith it is impossible to please God. And therefore, that no mortal man may make a law to the conscience, and force unto it by persecutions,

consequently may not compel unto any religion where faith is wanting. . . ."69 He accused the learned of England of using the sword in forcing the established religion because of the profit and honor they enjoyed. Not only was persecution for the cause of conscience contrary to the teachings of Christ, but also against the profession and practice of certain famous rulers. Likewise it had been condemned by many ancient and current writers, both Catholic and Puritan. The granting of religious freedom he pointed out had brought prosperity rather than suffering to other countries. After assuring the King that this will not deprive him of any of his God given power, he closed with a plea that persecution be arrested and liberty of conscience be granted in the commonwealth.<sup>70</sup>

The impact of the early English Baptists in the struggle for religious liberty lay essentially in two areas. Men like John Smyth and Thomas Helwys pioneered in defining religious liberty and defending it in terms of a well reasoned Biblical foundation. They spoke not in isolation but out of the experience of a religious community. It is significant that their efforts did not terminate with the mere definition of so vital a concept. Encouraged by their congregations these men and others, notably John Murton and Leonard Busher, petitioned the authorities publicly pointing out the inconsistencies and fallacies in government policies. Though freedom of conscience was not achieved within the life time of any of the early English Baptists, the foundation they laid in doctrine and action was essential to the final emergence of true liberty in religion. Without these

early Baptists, England would have been indefinitely delayed in establishing religious liberty for all.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>W. K. Jordan, The Development of Religious Toleration In England, (Cambridge, 1936), I, pp. 19-26.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel R. Gardiner, History of England, (London, 1883), I, pp. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup>Jordan, Development, I, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>7</sup>Gardiner, History, I, pp. 97, 193.

<sup>8</sup>Jordan, Development, I, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>Horton Davies, The English Free Churches, (London, 1952), pp. 29-31.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 31-32.

<sup>12</sup>Jordan, Development, II, p. 263.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>14</sup>Dictionary of National Biography, Sir Leslie Stephen & Sir Sidney Lee, (London, 1949-50), XVIII, p. 447.

<sup>15</sup>Mervyn D. Himbury, British Baptists A Short History, (London, 1962), p. 27.

<sup>16</sup>W. J. McGlothlin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, (Philadelphia, 1911), p. 52.

<sup>17</sup>Jordan, Development, II, pp. 262-265.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 262-265.

<sup>19</sup>D.N.B., IX, p. 375.

<sup>20</sup>Jordan, Development, II, pp. 262-268.

<sup>21</sup>B. Evans, The Early English Baptists, (London, 1862), II, p. 23.

<sup>22</sup>William L. Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith, (Chicago, 1959), p. 64.

<sup>23</sup>Edward B. Underhill, Struggles and Triumphs of Religious Liberty, (London, 1846), p. 31.

<sup>24</sup>Jordan, Development, II, p. 258.

<sup>25</sup>Henry Cook, What Baptists Stand For, (London, 1947), p. 154.

<sup>26</sup>Jordan, Development, II, p. 206.

<sup>27</sup>Cook, Stand, p. 167.

<sup>28</sup>Jordan, Development, II, p. 262.

<sup>29</sup>D.N.B., XVIII, p. 476.

<sup>30</sup>Adam Taylor, History of the English General Baptists, (London, 1818), p. 85.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>32</sup>John Smyth, The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ's College: 1594-8, (London, 1915), I, pp. xliii, 250-267.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>34</sup>Jordan, Development, II, p. 269.

<sup>35</sup>Lumpkin, Confessions, pp. 99-101.

<sup>36</sup>W. T. Whitley, A History of British Baptists, (London, 1923), p. 26.

<sup>37</sup>Lumpkin, Confessions, p. 136.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>41</sup>Jordan, Development, II, pp. 270-274.

<sup>42</sup>Whitley, History, p. 30.

<sup>43</sup>McGlothlin, Confessions, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 91-92.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas Helwys, The Mystery of Iniquity, (London, 1935), pp, x, xiv.

<sup>47</sup>Whitley, History, p. 34.

- 48 Helwys, Mistery, pp. 8-36.
- 49 Ibid., p. 69.
- 50 Ibid., pp. 37-80.
- 51 Ibid., pp. 82-121-, 204-212.
- 52 Whitley, History, p. 33.
- 53 D.N.B., IX, p. 375.
- 54 Champlin Burrage, The Early English Dissenters, (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 215- 16.
- 55 Jordan, Development, II, p. 274.
- 56 Edward B. Underhill, Religious Liberty, (London, 1846), pp. 86-89.
- 57 Ibid., pp. 95-101.
- 58 Ibid., pp. 105-134.
- 59 Ibid., p. 108.
- 60 Ibid., pp. 136-172.
- 61 Ibid., p. 3.
- 62 Evans, Baptist, pp. 229-31.
- 63 Underhill, Liberty, pp. 15-25.
- 64 Ibid., pp. 33-40.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 50-56.
- 66 Ibid., p. 183.
- 67 Ibid., p. 193.
- 68 Ibid., pp. 190-210.
- 69 Ibid., p. 210.
- 70 Ibid., pp. 210-227.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### A. PRIMARY SOURCES

Helwys, Thomas. The Mistery of Iniquity. London: The Kingsgate Press, 1935.

This work of Thomas Helwys was extremely useful in gaining an understanding of his of what religious liberty meant and how it should be implimented in English society.

Lumpkin, William L. Baptist Confessions of Faith. Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959.

This is a very good collection of original confessions of faith.

McGlothlin, W. J. Baptist Confessions of Faith. Philadelphia: American Baptist Society, 1911.

Another excellent collection of confessions.

Smyth, John. The Works of John Smyth, Fellow Christ's College 1594-8. 2 v. Cambridge, 1915.

The original works of Smyth were helpful in tracing the development of his understanding of the relationship of the church to the state.

Underhill, Edward B. Religious Liberty. New York: Lewis Coby, 1851.

This was a most valuable source containing a number of early treatises on religious liberty.

Underhill, Edward B. Struggles and Triumphs of Religious Liberty. London, 1846.

The book is good in its comments on the struggle for liberty.

### B. SECONDARY SOURCES

Burrage, Champlin. The Early English Dissenters In The Light of Research 1550-1641. 2v. Cambridge: at the University Press, 1912.

This book was helpful in verifying certain facts about the prominent figures in the struggle and their writings.

Cook, Henry. What Baptists Stand For. London: The Kingsgate Press, 1947.

Cook's book is a fairly good source for background material.

Crosby, Thomas. The History of the English Baptists. London, 1738.

This standard work on Paptist is not particularly useful because of its poor orginization and the difficulty in reading it.



Davies, Horton. The English Free Churches. London: Oxford University Press, 1952.

For background this is a good source.

Dexter, Henry Martin. The True Story of John Smyth. Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1881.

Although there was little pertaining to the subject of religious liberty, this was a very respectable book.

Evan, B. The Early English Baptists London, J. Heaton & Son, 1862.

This very reliable old source was helpful in its commentary on the works of the main Baptist thinkers.

Gardiner, Samuel R. History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War 1603-1642. London: Longmans, Green, 1883-84.

Gardiner's work is an excellent general background work on the period.

Himbury, D. Mervyn. British Baptists: A Short History. London, 1823.

This book was useful for background and commentary on the writings of the early Baptist thinkers.

Jordan, W. K. The Development of Religious Toleration in England.

4 v. Cambridge: Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1936.

This history was the most extensive and valuable source for factual documentation and commentary on the struggle for liberty of conscience.

Lofton, George A. English Baptist Reformation, from 1609 to 1641 A. D. Louisville: Dearing, 1899.

This was a fairly good source for background.

Taylor, Adam. History of the English General Baptists. London, 1818.

Adam's book is reliable but not outstanding.

Vedder, Henry Clay. A Short History of Baptist. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication, 1897.

Vedder was useful in some measure for background.

Whitley, W. T. A History of British Baptists. London: Griffin & Co., 1923.

This was a very good work for background and commentary.

The Dictionary of National Biography. Sir Leslie Stephen & Sir Sidney Lee. London: Oxford University Press, 1949-50.